



English education and *Swami and Friends*

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The time stretch for *Swami and Friends* is the post-Macaulay Minute India. English medium institutions were the craze of the day. Traditional schools and methods of learning had faded to oblivion. Narayan himself was educated in an English medium school and was one of the first heavyweight trio who adapted the English language as the medium for their art. The language of the colonial master becomes the instrument of scrutiny of the very colonial system in the hands of Narayan. Narayan's everlasting concern was the change that British Imperialism instrumented over the traditional society. The use of the language of power by Narayan reflected the prevailing post-colonial backdrop, the actively anti-colonial sentiments prevailing at the time. However, there is no denying that the people of the subcontinent appropriated with enthusiasm the language of the subjugators that percolated down the system of educational institutions. The study of the English language and literature established itself firmly in India so as to become a dominant political and cultural phenomena. The English language brought along with it a definite and unique English culture that the Indians assimilated into their own, in some cases even replacing the traditional faiths and beliefs, gestures and attitudes. The English education system was part of a great cultural design that to some extent back-fired when creative artists began using the language as an instrument of protest against the colonial masters.

Narayan grew up in a system where English enjoyed greater status than his native tongue. English was the language of social status, of economic advantages, and of administrative privilege. Like all well-educated of his time, Narayan imbued himself in works of great European literature, especially the English literature. He was also an avid follower of



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the English journals of his time. Thus the English language entered his system and he developed the ability of using the language spontaneously.

Swami and Friends was the first novel of Narayan. Indian life under colonial rule is the central concern of this novel. The relationship of the English masters and the Indian servants is quite complicated. The colonized Indians resist the colonial rule, they despise the British, but, at the same time are drawn like moths to the accoutrements of the British power. This in turn resulted in the language of the colonizer becoming the symbol of respect, power and privilege. The first school that Swami attends in the novel is the Albert Mission School, where English is the language of instruction. Shankar is respected by his peer group because he has the ability to converse with his teachers in English. Rajam becomes the object of awe as he can speak English almost like the Europeans. Narayan advocates the use of English for practical purpose although he admits that it is a foreign language (in his essay, “Fifteen Years”). He establishes that because of the imposition of the British system of education, the English language has become an integral part of the Indian life. However, the English that Narayan advocates is not the Englishman’s English, but the Indian’s home-made English. For Narayan, the value of English in India was utilitarian, a means of reaching out to the world, making the voice of India heard beyond its political borders. Narayan’s language is English, but Swami, his parents, his grandmother, his friends (except Rajam and his father), all wear traditional Indian attire. Only Swami’s father wears a coat over his *kurta*, and that is an indication that the family is well-off, can afford English style coats, and is also a modern



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progressive family. The spoken words are English, but the stirrings of the soul, essentially Indian. Malgudi is in microcosm, India in all its variety.

Swami and Friends sometimes appear to sympathise with the British power. The Albert Mission School insults Indian traditions and Hinduism blatantly. The institution gets away with only a letter of protest from Swami's father that too drafted in the diction of the Sahib's. It is a letter of protest by "an obedient servant". Narayan's later explicit dislike for brown sahibs and sympathy with the nationalistic movements is nowhere evident in *Swami and Friends*. In fact, the two sketches of the Brown Sahib's that appear in the narrative, Rajam's father, the DSP of Malgudi, and the Forest Officer who rescues Swami when he is lost in the jungle, are both drawn with sympathy, quite amicable characters.

Swami gets involved with picketing and stone-pelting at the Missionary School. However, it leaves no strong impression but is more of a child's adventure at the end of the day. Even burning of foreign goods in the square, where Swami participates by burning his cap, falls flat when Swami's father reveals that the cap was Indian made. Even then, these light sketches serve as an example of how the Movement for India's freedom from British Imperialism was catching up with the lives of every common man of the land, even in remote corners like Malgudi. Swami is rebuked by his father for his involvement with the anti-British mob. This coupled with the fact that the mob remains absolutely undescribed as far as human figures are concerned, has been often read as the last weak attempt of colonial



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assertion. The cap burning episode tells the reader how every Indian, even a child was not left out from the non-cooperation movement of Gandhiji.

The irony of the times presented in *Swami and Friends* is that although the anti-British movement had reached its frenzied heights, everybody was in love with the game of cricket, very much a symbol of the British Raj. Another was the status accorded to the Rolls Royce as the status quo for social excellence. Makinh Lawley Extension an indelible landmark for Malgudi Narayan manifests the unalterable effect that the British colonizers stamped Indian life with.

Swami leaves home to return to it later is the tale of the new families breaking away from traditional agrarian social norms, a tendency towards the nuclear family, again a modern Europe learned trait. The fragmented society is yet to be born but signs are already prominent. The English education gives Swami and his friends a new language, a new understanding of a wider world, however skewed that cognizance may be (Swami's wonder at how people can inhabit such a crooked place like Europe!); but it takes away the security and calm of the traditional life, and like Swami, the modern colonial and post-colonial Indian gets lost in the wilderness of the wide, complex, frightful world of the dark unknown. The Board school unlike the missionary school is not driven by the zeal for conversion of natives, but is no better as it forces Swami to run. The utter confusion that English education resulted is manifest in the teaming of the dhoti with the overcoat, creating a look that is funny, even if not stinging. Geography, Mathematics, English, and the Bible do not encourage knowledge,



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rather they instil fear of the cane. It is only the loose Sanskrit class that ushers in a breath of fresh air for the students.